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A New Chinese ICBM Capability

China has developed an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of hitting targets in the United States.

This alarming news means that a second communist power now has the ability to threaten America with nuclear devastation. Until now, U.S. defense policy has been based on the assumption that only the Soviet Union posed such a clear and present danger to the United States.

The reason this has not been reported before is that "official government sources" have consistently played down any suggestion that the People's Republic of China was a direct nuclear threat to this country. They have emphasized instead the bitter rivalry between the two communist superpowers, and cite our supposedly firm "friendship" with China.

But Asian experts in and out of the government caution that this friendly relationship is a tenuous thing at best, likely to evaporate at any time over issues like Korea or Taiwan, or simply because of the ideological differences that separate our two countries. They note that our strongest bond is mutual hostility toward the Soviets, and warn that the Chinese still regard the United States as their chief antagonist after the Soviets.

From top secret documents and other intelligence sources, my associate Dale Van Atta has pieced together the story of China's arrival at a position from which it can back up any future change of policy with nuclear ICBMs.

The huge Chinese missile is designated the CSS-X-4, and it has a range of 7,800 miles, more than enough to devastate U.S. population centers from

bases on the mainland of China. The only other long-range missile the Chinese were known to have was the CSS-X-3, with a range of 3,600 miles—enough to hit Moscow, but nowhere near enough to make it to the U.S. mainland.

When Defense Secretary Harold Brown went to China in January, the "friendly" Chinese government didn't let him see the CSS-X-4. But he knew about it—and almost revealed that knowledge to reporters who accompanied him on the trip.

Asked if China was "anywhere near acquiring" an ICBM, Brown replied: "China's been developing ballistic missiles of increasing range, and I am sure they are working on intercontinental ones. In fact, I know they are. I don't want to say precisely how far they've gotten."

I can say how far they've gotten. The Chinese have been working on the CSS-X-4 for more than a decade. Its potential as an ICBM has been partly obscured by its dual role as a booster for space satellites.

In July 1975 when the Chinese successfully launched a satellite into orbit, a CIA "Top Secret Umbra" report called the shot "a significant step forward for the Chinese missile and space program," and added:

"The success with the CSS-X-4 suggests the Chinese have corrected major problems they have been having with this missile. . . . The CSS-X-4, a large, two-stage missile, is China's only missile with true intercontinental range, and it is clearly the key to a Chinese ICBM force. It is not, however, expected to become operational as an ICBM for several years."

"The CSS-X-4 will probably be able to carry a thermonuclear warhead about 7,000 miles or place a missile weighing approximately 5,000 pounds into a low earth orbit."

That was five years ago. In 1978, another top-secret CIA document warned that the CSS-X-4 "will soon be capable of hitting targets in the continental United States."